

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 674

CS 501 385

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TITLE The Effects of Television Advertising on Children: Parent-Child Communication in Supermarket Breakfast Cereal Selection. Final Report.  
INSTITUTION Michigan State Univ., East Lansing. Coll. of Communication Arts.  
SPONS AGENCY Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C.  
REPORT NO MSU-7  
PUB DATE Oct 75  
NOTE 18p.  
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; \*Children; Environmental Influences; Intercommunication; \*Parent Child Relationship; Publicize; \*Reactive Behavior; Socioeconomic Influences; \*Television Commercials; Television Viewing

## ABSTRACT

In this study, naturalistic patterns of parent-child interaction were unobtrusively observed in supermarkets to describe characteristics of breakfast cereal selection by 516 family units. The interaction sequence was summarized into five dimensions: initiating party, tone of initial message, type of response, type of consequence, and references to the cereal premium or nutritional value of the cereal. Findings showed that the child initiated the interaction in two-thirds of the cases, usually by demanding rather than requesting the cereal, with highest levels of child-initiated interaction occurring for children who were younger, white, and middle class; that parents were twice as likely to approve as refuse proposed purchases, with success in obtaining the desired cereal increasing with age; that one-fourth of all interaction sequences resulted in parent-child conflict with the middle age group scoring highest on these sequences and most problems arising when parents responded negatively; and that the premium was explicitly mentioned as the primary purchase motivation by one-tenth of the children (highest for older, minority, and working class subgroups).  
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THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN:

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN SUPERMARKET BREAKFAST CEREAL SELECTION

-- FINAL REPORT --

October, 1975

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Report #7  
TV Advertising and Children Project

CS 501 385

## ABSTRACT

Naturalistic patterns of parent-child interaction were unobtrusively observed in supermarkets to describe characteristics of breakfast cereal selection. Observers surreptitiously recorded the sequence of behavior as 516 family units considered cereal purchases. These are the demographic characteristics of the decision-making dyads: 87% of the parents were mothers and 13% were fathers; 60% of the children were boys and 40% were girls; 53% of the families were middle class, 41% were working class and 6% were lower class; 69% were whites and 31% were minorities; the children ranged in age from 3 to 12, with a mean of 7 years old.

The interaction sequence was summarized by coders into these dimensions: initiating party (parent or child), tone of initial message (child requesting vs. demanding, or parent inviting vs. directing), type of response (parental yielding vs. rejecting, or child agreeing vs. declining), type of consequence (parent-child conflict, child unhappiness), and references to the cereal premium or nutritional value of the cereal. These are some key findings:

(a) INITIATION: The child initiated the interaction in two-thirds of the cases, usually by demanding rather than requesting a cereal. One-third of the parents displayed the initiative, generally by inviting the child to select a cereal. Highest levels of child-initiated interaction occurred for children who were younger, white, and middle class.

(b) RESPONSE: Parents were twice as likely to approve as refuse proposed purchase, with demands resulting in slightly more acceptance than requests. Success in obtaining the desired cereal increased with age. Children typically made a selection as directed or invited, with little disagreement.

(c) CONSEQUENCES: One-fourth of all interaction sequences resulted in parent-child conflict, and the child became unhappy in one-sixth of all cases. The middle age group scored highest on these unpleasant consequences. Most problems arose when parents responded negatively to requests or demands; two-thirds of these rejections or denials led to conflict, and one-half were followed by unhappiness.

(d) REASONS FOR SELECTION: The premium accompanying the cereal was explicitly mentioned as the primary purchase motivation by one-tenth of the children. Premium-oriented selection was highest for older, minority, and working class subgroups. Less than 1% of the children made reference to nutritional attributes.

## PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN SUPERMARKET BREAKFAST CEREAL SELECTION

Patterns of interaction between parents and children were unobtrusively observed to determine the process and effects of decision-making in the selection of breakfast cereals. Earlier studies in this series have demonstrated that most children are heavily exposed to cereal advertising on television, and that exposure produces greater assertiveness by the child in selecting cereals. While this investigation is not a direct test of the influence of TV advertising, it provides descriptive evidence concerning the behaviors that are shaped by cereal ads seen by the children. These are the key problems analyzed in this study:

- (a) Does the parent or child usually initiate the interaction at the point of purchase?
- (b) Do children more often request or demand purchase of cereals? Do parents invite the child to select cereal, or do they direct which cereal that the child must choose?
- (c) What are the responses of parents to child requests and demands? What are the child responses to parental invitations and directions?
- (d) How often do children explicitly cite the cereal premium as the primary reason for desiring a cereal brand?
- (e) How often is there parent-child conflict over cereal selection, and child expressions of unhappiness over decision-making?
- (f) How do these patterns of communication vary by age, sex, race, and social status of the actors?
- (g) What are the consequences when parents reject or deny child initiatives?
- (h) What are the consequences of premium-based requests or demands?

To examine the elements of the cereal decision process, actual observation of parent-child dyads was conducted in the naturalistic supermarket setting. Observers surreptitiously viewed the behavior of parents and children at the cereal counter as the process unfolded, and recorded the sequence of action

along with the characteristics of the participants. This provides a more accurate assessment of the varying modes of interaction than would be obtained by self-reports elicited in interviews or direct measurement under laboratory conditions. Interview data would be subject to distortion and memory error, while laboratory behavior would be artificial compared to the real-life supermarket situation. Since cereal selection is typically a routine and rapid process, the investigation encompasses only a small set of variables measured and analyzed with simple and straightforward procedures.

#### METHOD

The observations were conducted in twenty standard supermarkets in inner-city and suburban areas near Detroit and Lansing, Michigan. Supermarkets in less wealthy neighborhoods were oversampled to maximize the number of minority families. The universe of subjects was defined as all family units that included a child between the ages of three and twelve who were considering a cereal purchase. Most cases encountered in the supermarkets included a mother and one child; however, many units involved two or more children, and sometimes a father was shopping with the children. Although the mother-child dyad would have been the simplest to analyze, limiting the study to these cases would have restricted the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, multiple-child units and units led by a father or both mother and father were also sampled; the observers coded the behavior of all respondents.

The observers were five undergraduate students who observed alone in the store. In order to closely observe yet not contaminate the behavior of the shoppers, they stood near the cereal counter and tried to present the appearance of a store clerk. Their age and dress was similar to typical supermarket clerks, and they carried clipboard with a cover sheet listing cereal products

on which they appeared to be taking stock. According to the observers, none of the parents or children became suspicious of their presence, although several supermarket managers eventually asked them to leave. In general, the observers were successful in attaining an unobtrusive vantage point for listening to all of the communication and furtively watching much of the behavior.

A total of 516 family units were observed during the summers of 1973 and 1974. Observers rated 53% of the families as middle class, 41% as working class, and 6% as lower class, based on dress, store and demeanor. Whites constituted 69% of the sample, while 26% were blacks and 5% were Chicano and other minorities. In multiple-child families, analyses were conducted for the one child that fell within the age range or the one who first became involved in a cereal decision. Using these criteria, the ages of the 516 focal children were distributed normally with a mean of seven years old; 60% were boys and 40% were girls, due to greater initiative shown by brothers. In two-parent family shopping units, the parent most centrally involved in the cereal selection decision was classified; 87% were mothers and 13% were fathers (other relatives were excluded from the universe).

The primary responsibility of the observer was a verbatim description of the sequence of parent-child exchanges. On a standardized form, they recorded the opening statement and identified which party said it; then the other party's response was recorded, followed by the next statement and subsequent interactions until the sequence was complete. In some cases, verbal communication was not employed, as when the child merely placed a box of cereal in the shopping cart or the mother merely nodded approval. Observers also marked whether "conflict" had occurred between the parent and child, and whether the child was "unhappy" with the resolution of the situation.

After the field work, the observation forms were coded by two independent coders. The major task involved summarizing the conversational sequence. Only comments directly pertaining to the cereal decision in the primary dyad were coded; the chain of communications was compressed into an essential stimulus-response categorization. First, the coder determined which party initiated the cereal selection aspect of the interaction (Parent or Child) and rated the tone of the message: if the child initiated, did they ask the parent's permission for a cereal (Request) or did they more forcefully tell the parent that they wanted a cereal (Demand); if the parent initiated, did they ask the child what he or she wanted or tell the child to pick their choice (Invite), or did they order the child which cereal to select (Direct). The most frequent situation was the child demanding cereal, while the least frequent was the parent directing selection by the child.

The classification of the response was based on the action eventually taken by the other party: if the child made a request, the parent could agree, deny outright, or suggest another cereal; if the child made demand, the parent could yield, reject outright, or suggest another; if the parent invited selection, the child could select or decline; and if the parent directed selection, the child could agree, decline, or suggest another cereal. Intermediary discussion or arguments prior to these goal states weren't explicitly coded at this point. In two situations, the sequence was coded one step further: if the parent invited selection and the child made a selection, the parental response of agreeing to the selection or denying the selection was scored; if the parent directed selection and the child suggested another, coders rated whether the parent agreed or denied the child's counter-nomination. The flow chart for this coding scheme is graphically displayed in Table 1.

Since much controversy has surrounded the promotion of premiums that are associated with cereal purchases, coders examined the recorded conversations to determine the incidence of children mentioning the premium. If the child explicitly stated that he or she wanted the cereal primarily as a means of obtaining the premium, this was scored as a premium-based selection. Secondary or implicit reference to the premium was not scored as a premium-based selection.

Finally, the coders noted whether the child overtly stated a nutritional reason for wanting the cereal. Very liberal standards were used, such that even a secondary reference about the cereal being "good for me" was categorized as nutritionally-based selection.

#### RESULTS

In two-thirds of the cases studied, the child initiated the interaction sequence by expressing a desire for cereal. Table 1 shows that 46% of the children posed a cereal "demand" and an additional 20% offered a less strident cereal "request." Surprisingly, the rate of positive parental response is slightly higher in the demand than request situation, by a 65% to 58% margin. Regardless of the child's approach tactic, parental purchase of the cereal occurred more than twice as often as a flat refusal, while 6% deflected the child's initiative by suggesting another cereal.

Most of the parent-initiated sequences involved an invitation for the child to select a cereal (Table 1). In the vast majority of these cases, the child chose a brand and the parent agreed to the selection. There were a few instances where the child declined to pick a cereal or where the parent did not approve of the child's decision. Occasionally the parent expressly told the child to select a particular cereal, and this was generally followed by the

directed choice. However, a few children declined to pick a cereal and a few others made a counter-suggestion.

Table 2 and 3 show the demographic correlates of parent-child interaction in cereal selection. The findings indicate that the rate of child initiation is highest for younger (76%) rather than older (56%) children, for whites (70%) rather than minorities (58%), and for those from the middle class (70%) rather than working class (62%). There are no sex differences. The rate of child success in obtaining the desired cereal increases with age, from 59% to 68%. Furthermore, slightly higher success rates were obtained by female, minority, and middle class children. When the parent initiated the sequence, child acquiescence tended to increase with age; the only other demographic difference is the greater level of selection by white rather than minority children.

A substantial minority of parent-child interaction sequences resulted in either conflict or unhappiness on the part of the child. Table 2 shows that conflict is somewhat higher for the middle age group of children (30%), as is the display of unhappiness (20%). In the older age group, conflict was almost always accompanied by unhappiness (19% conflict, 17% unhappiness), while this happened in less than half of the cases among young children (24% conflict, 10% unhappiness).

The strongest differences for other demographic variables are the greater levels of unhappiness among minority and working class children (Table 3). The incidence of conflict shows no pronounced difference according to sex, race, or class.

The primary predictor of unpleasant consequences is the negative response of one party to the other party's initiative. In Table 4, it can be observed that conflict and unhappiness seldom occurred when the parent agreed to the

child's demand or request, or when the child selected a cereal in response to parental invitation or direction. On the other hand, cases where the parent denied the child's initiative ended in conflict 65% of the time and in unhappiness 48% of the time. In the rare instances where the child declined the initiative of the parent, conflict arose in almost half of the dyads and unhappiness occurred for one-third of the children.

In explaining why they desired a particular cereal brand, 9% of the children explicitly identified the premium as the primary reason. Table 2 and 3 present data showing that mention of premiums is somewhat higher in the older, minority and working class subgroups. It should be noted that a much larger percentage of children based their cereal selection at least partially on premium considerations. Observers felt that perhaps one-fourth of the children were making their decision primarily on the basis of the premium rather than the cereal itself, but this motivation was not overtly expressed in interaction with the parent. In addition, one-tenth of the cases showed secondary emphasis on the premium; while the premium was mentioned, it was not judged to be a more salient motive than desire for the product. Thus, almost half of the children appeared to take account of the premium in choosing a cereal, even though a conservative classification reduces this to the 9% of cases where the role of the premium was primary and explicit. In Table 5, the correlates of mentioning premiums are displayed. Children who referred to the cereal premium were slightly more successful in obtaining the desired package by a 69% to 62% margin over those not concerned with the premium. Premium-oriented youngsters were somewhat less likely to become involved in conflict with the parent over the cereal decision, although they did express marginally more unhappiness. Children in the older age group were more likely to experience conflict and unhappiness when basing requests on

premiums rather than other reasons, compared to younger children; none of the premium-oriented young children showed conflict or unhappiness, while 27% of the premium-oriented old children exhibited each factor.

Only four children made any reference to nutritional attributes of a cereal. Thus, more than 99% of all cases did not involve an explicit mention of either vitamins, minerals, or general healthful value of the product.

#### DISCUSSION

Unobtrusive observation of naturalistic supermarket decision-making between parents and children indicates that youngsters forcefully demand cereal in almost half of all cases; parents yield to two-thirds of these demands, and this generally terminates the interaction sequence. One-fifth of the children use a less assertive approach by requesting a particular cereal; parents express agreement to three-fifths of these requests. The surprisingly higher child success rate for telling over asking may be due to parental desire to avoid trouble that might result from rejecting demands based on strongly felt desires.

When parents do not acquiesce to the initiative of the child, conflict ensues two-thirds of the time and the child expresses unhappiness half of the time. Negative parental responses to demands or requests account for most of the unpleasant consequences of the cereal decision-making process.

Parents are the initiating party in one-third of all interactions. In the typical sequence, the parent invites the child to select a cereal and the child makes a choice that the parent supports. In a small proportion of cases, the parent takes a more authoritative approach in directing the child to make a certain selection; while the child is generally agreeable to this guidance, there are some instances where he declines or suggests another brand. In the infrequent situations where the child does not respond in accordance with the parental

initiative, parent-child conflict and child unhappiness tend to occur.

The explicit role of premiums is not impressive in these interactions, although desire for the premium does appear to underlie a large minority of selection preferences. Few children make overt mention of the premium in expressing their choices but many seem to implicitly consider this feature in deciding among cereals. Perhaps children realize that reference to the premium is not the most efficacious strategy for persuading parents. However, the 9% who do refer to the premium tend to be more successful and less involved in conflict than children using other approaches.

If the importance of premiums is understated, the role of nutritional attributes of cereal is almost nonexistent. Hardly any children seem to consider nutritive merits in distinguishing among various brands, despite a strong emphasis in television advertising. Apparently substantive cereal qualities such as vitamins and minerals are not a salient factor influencing youngsters preferences.

The patterns of parent-child interaction show no dramatic differences among the demographic subgroups studied, although modest relationships exist. Younger children tend to initiate requests and demands but achieve a lower success rate than older children; conflict and unhappiness occurs most often in the middle age group. White, middle class children are somewhat more likely to initiate interaction; working class and minority children more often mention premiums as a reason for cereal preference. It is notable that boys and girls behave in a very similar manner.

In general, the observations indicate that cereal selection is essentially a simple, quick, and routine interaction that follows an elementary stimulus-response sequence. Although the overall set of parent-child exchanges frequently persists beyond half a minute, much of the communication is peripheral or

redundant. Some cases are so routine that only a handful of words are spoken by either party. Observers report that many children appear to know ahead of time exactly what they want, and most of the others make rapid decisions on the scene. This suggests that previous experience or television exposure provide a working familiarity with the wide range of alternatives in the competitive cereal market.

Although a substantial minority of parent-child dyads exhibit arguments and acrimony, open-end observations indicate that the conflict is seldom intense or persistent. Displays of child anger or sadness are also short-lived in most cases. There are very few instances of traumatic unpleasanties resulting from denial of child initiatives.

The observational design of this study offers numerous advantages in terms of external validity and accuracy in measuring the overt variables in the naturalistic setting. However, it should be noted that the lack of experimental intervention or survey questioning limits inferences as to the sources of the children's behavior. In particular, there are no direct indications of the impact of television advertising on these interactions, since no measures are available concerning the TV viewing behavior of the children. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the pattern of behavior is affected by exposure to messages prior to the shopping excursion, since the children enter the selection process with firm preferences and often react with displeasure when they do not obtain their favored cereal.

Table 1

FLOW OF PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION IN BREAKFAST CEREAL SELECTION

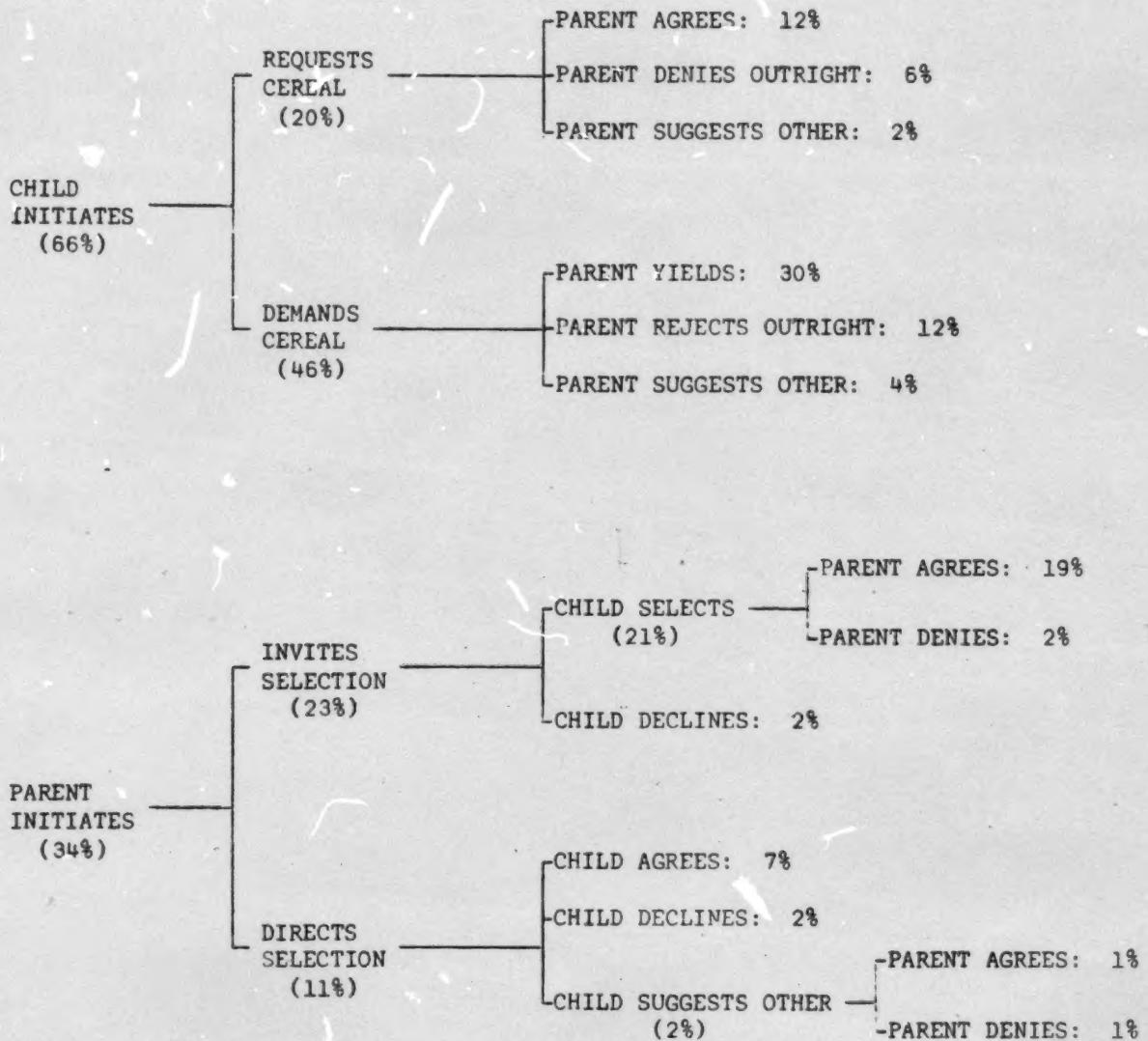


Table 2

## PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION AND CONSEQUENCES, BY AGE OF CHILD

|                                                 | Age of Child:       |                     |                      |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                                                 | <u>3-5</u><br>N=156 | <u>6-8</u><br>N=228 | <u>9-12</u><br>N=133 |
| Parent-child interaction pattern                |                     |                     |                      |
| Child initiates, Parent agrees/yields           | 45%                 | 40%                 | 38%                  |
| Child initiates, Parent denies/suggests/rejects | 31                  | 25                  | 18                   |
| Parent initiates, Child selects/agrees          | 18                  | 23                  | 37                   |
| Parent initiates, Child declines/suggests       | 6                   | 9                   | 7                    |
| Child explicitly mentions premium as reason     |                     |                     |                      |
| Yes                                             | 6%                  | 8%                  | 11%                  |
| No                                              | 94                  | 92                  | 89                   |
| Parent-child conflict over cereal selection     |                     |                     |                      |
| Yes                                             | 24%                 | 30%                 | 19%                  |
| No                                              | 76                  | 70                  | 81                   |
| Child expression of unhappiness over decision   |                     |                     |                      |
| Yes                                             | 10%                 | 20%                 | 17%                  |
| No                                              | 90                  | 80                  | 83                   |

Table 3

## PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION AND CONSEQUENCES, BY SEX, RACE, AND CLASS

|                          | Sex:       |             | Race:        |                 | Social class  |                |
|--------------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
|                          | <u>Boy</u> | <u>Girl</u> | <u>White</u> | <u>Minority</u> | <u>Middle</u> | <u>Working</u> |
|                          | N=313      | N=203       | N=356        | N=160           | N=272         | N=244          |
| Parent-child interaction |            |             |              |                 |               |                |
| C initiates, P agrees    | 39%        | 43%         | 43%          | 38%             | 45%           | 37%            |
| C initiates, P denies    | 26         | 24          | 27           | 20              | 25            | 25             |
| P initiates, C selects   | 27         | 27          | 25           | 30              | 24            | 29             |
| P initiates, C declines  | 8          | 6           | 5            | 12              | 6             | 9              |
| Child mentions premium   |            |             |              |                 |               |                |
| Yes                      | 9%         | 8%          | 7%           | 13%             | 6%            | 11%            |
| No                       | 91         | 92          | 93           | 87              | 94            | 89             |
| Parent-child conflict    |            |             |              |                 |               |                |
| Yes                      | 27%        | 22%         | 25%          | 26%             | 23%           | 28%            |
| No                       | 73         | 78          | 75           | 74              | 77            | 72             |
| Child unhappiness        |            |             |              |                 |               |                |
| Yes                      | 17%        | 15%         | 14%          | 20%             | 12%           | 20%            |
| No                       | 83         | 85          | 86           | 80              | 88            | 80             |

Table 4

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION PATTERN AND CONSEQUENCES

|                       |     | Parent-child interaction pattern |                                  |                                   |                                   |
|-----------------------|-----|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                       |     | C initiates<br>P agrees<br>N=211 | C initiates<br>P denies<br>N=128 | P initiates<br>C selects<br>N=137 | P initiates<br>C declines<br>N=40 |
| Parent-child conflict |     |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |
|                       | Yes | 9%                               | 65%                              | 6%                                | 46%                               |
|                       | No  | 91                               | 35                               | 94                                | 54                                |
| Child unhappiness     |     |                                  |                                  |                                   |                                   |
|                       | Yes | 3%                               | 49%                              | 2%                                | 33%                               |
|                       | No  | 97                               | 52                               | 98                                | 67                                |

Table 5

## PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION AND CONSEQUENCES, BY MENTION OF PREMIUM

|                                                 |     | Child communication: |                |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----|----------------------|----------------|
|                                                 |     | <u>Mentions</u>      | <u>Doesn't</u> |
|                                                 |     | <u>Premium</u>       | <u>Mention</u> |
|                                                 |     | N=44                 | N=472          |
| Parent-child interaction pattern                |     |                      |                |
| Child initiates, Parent agrees/yields           |     | 45%                  | 40%            |
| Child initiates, Parent denies/suggests/rejects |     | 20                   | 25             |
| Parent initiates                                |     | 35                   | 35             |
| Parent-child conflict over cereal selection     |     |                      |                |
|                                                 | Yes | 18%                  | 26%            |
|                                                 | No  | 82                   | 74             |
| Child expression of unhappiness over decision   |     |                      |                |
|                                                 | Yes | 20%                  | 15%            |
|                                                 | No  | 80                   | 84             |